

# Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies

---

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Winter, Caring Democracy*

---

Article 5

3-2-2017

## Getting Back on Track to Being Human

Darcia Narvaez

*University of Notre Dame*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps>

---

### Recommended Citation

Narvaez, Darcia (2017) "Getting Back on Track to Being Human," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/ijps/vol4/iss1/5>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

The *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies* is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing. Authors retain ownership of their articles, which are made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial license (CC BY-NC 4.0).

 **LIBRARIES**  
PUBLISHING

## GETTING BACK ON TRACK TO BEING HUMAN

Darcia Narvaez, PhD

### Abstract

Cooperation and compassion are forms of intelligence. Their lack is an indication of ongoing stress or toxic stress during development that undermined the usual growth of compassion capacities. Though it is hard to face at first awareness, humans in the dominant culture tend to be pretty unintelligent compared to those from societies that existed sustainably for thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of years. Whereas in sustainable societies everyone must learn to cooperate with earth's systems to survive and thrive, in the dominant culture this is no longer the case. Now due to technological advances that do not take into account the long-term welfare of earth systems, humans have become "free riders" until these systems collapse from abuse or misuse. The dominant human culture, a "weed species," has come to devastate planetary ecosystems in a matter of centuries. What do we do to return ourselves to living as earth creatures, as one species among many in community? Humanity needs to restore lost capacities—relational attunement and communal imagination—whose loss occurs primarily in cultures dominated by child-raising practices and ways of thinking that undermine cooperative companionship and a sense of partnership that otherwise develops from the beginning of life. To plant the seeds of cooperation, democracy, and partnership, we need to provide the evolved nest to children, and facilitate the development of ecological attachment to their landscape. This will take efforts at the individual, policy, and institutional levels.

**Keywords:** Partnership Culture; Social Morality; Neurobiological Development; Undercare; Development Ethical Ecological Practice; Biodemocratic

Copyright: ©2017 Narvaez. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Noncommercial Attribution license (CC BY-NC 4.0), which allows for unrestricted noncommercial use, distribution, and adaptation, provided that the original author and source are credited.

Three questions are addressed in my work generally, and briefly in this article. Why do some humans routinely behave in selfish and even violent ways, preferring dominator culture to partnership culture? Why do some groups of humans, unlike other humans and animals, act in destructive ways toward the ecological systems of our planetary home, despite living within a highly cooperative natural world? How can

these misdevelopments be remedied, since they are destroying biocultural diversity, species, ecological balance, and flourishing on our precious planet?

## ARE HUMANS NATURALLY DESTRUCTIVE?

Some people believe that humans are naturally selfish and violent and even self-destructive by nature (e.g., Freud, 1929/2002; Pinker, 2011; for counter analysis, see Douglas Fry's *War, Peace and Human Nature*, 2013). It certainly appears that way in many places of the world today. But looking at human genus history and the nature of other animals, these views lack common sense. Like every other animal, human beings evolved to cooperate with the natural world, living in ecologies of give and take. In fact, each human being is a community of organisms, carrying 90-99% non-human genetic material (Dunn, 2011). Human beings are social mammals who are immature at birth, with most of the brain/body systems left to develop after birth (Trevathan, 2011). These are basic facts that lead us in a different explanatory direction.

A child is first a body within a body, a fetus in mother's womb, a dyad of relational reciprocity (helping mother's health in the long run; Russo, Moral, Balogh, Mailo & Russo, 2005). How nurturing that womb is matters for the child's health trajectory (Gluckman & Hanson, 2004, 2005, 2007). In a supportive postnatal environment, the child is immersed in Nature's gift economy of maternal unilateral giving and intersubjectivity (Vaughn, 2015). The child dances in the mother's orbit, her or his secure base, initiating the complexities of sociality (Schorer, 2003a, 2003b; Trevarthen, 2005). The child learns from mother's physical and emotional presence and responsiveness how to self-regulate and how to get along agilely with others. Gradually the gifting, at least in our ancestral environments, extended outward to other humans (e.g., fathers, grandparents) and the natural world. Most cultures of the world through history continued in a gift economy with their local landscapes, producing abundance, interdependence, and trust among humans and the more-than-human world (Gowdy, 1998, 2005; Worster, 1994), that is, until the last 1% of human

genus existence (the last 12,000 years or so), when many human groups shifted from immediate-return (no collection of resources, cultivation of plants, or domestication of animals) to delayed-return societies.

But this is getting ahead of the story. Humans are biosocial beings from the beginning and throughout life (Ingold, 2013). That means our biology is initially shaped by our social experience, and that our sociality emerges from those biological structures. Because human infants are born so immature—the equivalent of 18 months early compared to other hominids - they require particularly intensive caregiving after birth for proper neurobiological development (e.g., immunity, neurotransmitters, stress response, central nervous system, endocrine systems). All animals have an ecology of being and becoming, a nest for their young, and the early nest provides the foundation for the species' being and becoming.

Humanity's early nest matches that of social mammals, who emerged with an intensive nest over 30 million years ago. The nest includes extensive breastfeeding, touch, responsive care, positive support, and self-directed play (Konner, 2005). For humans this evolved “nest” (“evolved developmental niche” or EDN; Narvaez, 2016b) also includes multiple adult caregivers (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005). The components of humanity's evolved nest influence the health, sociality, and morality of offspring (for reviews by neuroscientists, anthropologists and clinicians see Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore & Gleason, 2013; Narvaez, Valentino Fuentes, McKenna & Gray, 2014).

Small-band hunter-gatherer societies (SBHG) provided the evolved “nest” to their children. Humans spent 99% of their genus history living in this type of nomadic foraging society, which we can contrast with “civilized” societies (Ingold, 2005; Narvaez, 2013; Wolff, 2001).

SBHG societies all over the world have been studied by anthropologists who note not only similar child-raising practices but similar cultures and adult personalities (Lee & Daly, 2005). They are fiercely egalitarian; generosity and sharing are expected (Boehm, 1999). They perceive the earth to be nurturing and food to be abundant as

they live in concert with earth systems. They have a sense of living on a nurturing earth with siblings of all types (species) that have their own purposes and agency. Deep empathy is fostered by the evolved nest, tailored to a particular landscape, accompanied by an autonomy that is curtailed by this empathy for others (including nonhumans).

The species' typical life is a deeply connected one. There is no illusion of separation from others or from nature (Can you imagine other animals acting this way?). Instead, one senses the living web of life. I contend that the early nest facilitates similar adult personalities and cultural practices found all over the world in these groups (Narvaez, 2013, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a). In these contexts, virtue is part of growing up: Heart-centered action guided by communal imagination includes a concern for the larger Whole (Narvaez, 2016a).

## **SELF-CENTERED HUMANS**

The destructiveness of humans toward conspecifics and toward their habitat, our planet, have no parallel in other animals. Why are contemporary humans so destructive? I trace self-centered and other-destructive behaviors in steps back to undercare in babyhood, when the embodied brain is establishing its capacities and intelligences, its sense of trust in the world, and its habits for the social life, including whether it will be oriented to openness or bracing (Narvaez, 2014, 2016b). Our laboratory work also shows that the components of the evolved nest are important for child sociality, morality, and wellbeing (Narvaez, Gleason et al., 2013; Narvaez, Wang, Gleason, Cheng, Lefever & Deng, 2013). In fact, compassion is a form of intelligence. It entails the capacity to take the perspective of another to feel for them and to feel responsible to be present to them. Lack of compassion is a signal of early life toxic stress that undermined the usual growth of compassion and other holistic capacities. Ashley Montagu pointed out:

“Children are even less capable than adults of living by bread alone. We have learned that the most important of all their needs is the need for love. We have learned that if children are not adequately loved during any period of their first half dozen years they are likely to suffer more or less severely, depending upon the severity of the privation of love which they have undergone, the duration, the age, and the constitution of the child. What we have learned from the study of the young of human kind is that they are born with every expectation of having their needs for love satisfied, and that when those needs are satisfied they develop in optimal health in every respect; but that when those needs are not adequately satisfied they develop, if they develop at all, in an unhealthy manner. Furthermore, that one of the primary defects of development which they exhibit is in their own ability to love.” (Montagu, 1963, p. 25)

It should not be surprising that humans raised in a degraded nest will be less physiologically, psychologically, and socially capable than those raised in the evolved nest. Child raising in “civilized” societies sometimes *intentionally* lacks the tenderness of the evolved nest when adults think their role is to deny the needs of young children to make them ‘good’ or ‘independent’ (Miller, 1990)—punishment of one form or another is considered necessary even though its long-term detrimental effects are increasingly documented (e.g., Gershoff, 2013; Gershoff, Lansford, Sexton, Davis-Kean & Sameroff, 2012). Indeed, our research shows the negative effects of punishment and the positive effects of affectionate touch on child development (Narvaez, Wang, Cheng et al., 2016).

When separation from others is instituted in early life through abuse, neglect, or even undercare (e.g., baby “independence”), separation from being, from self-in-representation, become orientations of the self. Separation leads to the need for an enlarged ego that becomes oppositional or withdrawn, easily leading to states of feeling superior, with dominance, or inferiority when dominance is lacking. It becomes natural for adults with these orientations to design cultures that reinforce a

dominance hierarchy. For example, honor killings are part of an illusion of separation which promotes protectionism. Commodification of relationships comes easily to undercared-for individuals, who were forced to divorce themselves from their true selves in babyhood (Laing, 1990).

Significantly, those who are missing the nest likely will have a hard time comprehending the capacities they are missing. When the underpinnings for agile, egalitarian social attunement do not develop because the companionship care of the evolved nest is missing, individuals are required to use more primitive systems to get along with others—systems that are oriented to domination and submission. Dominator models of coexistence have become rampant, and go along with the complex societies that include coercion of their members (Eisler, 1988).

What happens to an individual raised in what, in terms of our long evolutionary history, is *atypical*? In our ancestral context, they would have died due to poor health and lack of cooperative skills and intelligence. But modern societies seem unaware that the problematic people they raise are that way because of missing developmental supports. Instead, ill-health, aggressiveness, and unintelligence are assumed to be “normal” parts of human nature that get perpetuated in the society. Such individuals brace the self against life with self-protective armaments to make their way through the world. These armaments include rigid scripts, usually of dominance ideologies that offer formulas for the social life. Lacking an internal sense of how to live a good life, the individual must rely on sometimes arbitrary external rules. Some cultures take this to an extreme, controlling their members to keep the status quo of hierarchical power structures in place. Women and children have suffered the most from the hierarchical societies that have dominated recorded history.

According to Philip Cushman (1995), an “empty self” is a common outcome in the individualistic US today, partially propelled by a history of migration and mobility but also by psychological theory and family-community practices. I think the initial source

has to do with how adults, not only in the US, have turned away from children's wellbeing. When families and communities are distracted and stressed, they do not provide young children with the intensive, supportive care they evolved to need. Once a child is traumatized, it is difficult to reestablish the species-typical trajectory for development. And a distorted trajectory is often passed on to subsequent generations through epigenetic or extra-genetic inheritance like parenting practices.

No individual, rich or poor, is immune to a degraded nest. Among economic and power elites, self-focus is often apparent. This is often a self-remedy that starts in babyhood when the holding environment is inadequate (Winnicott, 1957). Even among academics, intellectualizing becomes dominant, often detached from emotion, due to the development of insecure (avoidant) attachment preferences which keep others at a distance but allow for control of information and garnering expertise power. With misdevelopment, one also can adopt an ideology that makes one feel superior, and justifies the anger and distrust one feels (e.g. male supremacism, white supremacism, human supremacism). Authoritarianism becomes attractive as an ideology of safety in a threatening world.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF UNDERCARE IN HISTORY

How did the once prevalent sustainable cultures become rare? Here is a brief sketch of what might have happened. Some scholars point to incursions of herding people from increasingly arid regions, who brought with them domination systems of top-down control, rigid male dominance, and reliance on violence (Gimbutas, 1982; DeMeo, 2011; Eisler, 1988). Others attribute the shift to the advent of agriculture. According to historian Calvin Luther Martin (1999), some societies became afraid that 'nature would not provide' and began to cultivate plants and domesticate (enslave) animals, leading to adult preoccupation with these activities and inequality. I speculate that this is where the undermining of child development first began. The shift away from species-typical upbringing was enhanced with patriarchy and the control of women (Eisler, 1988).



When a society relies on agriculture as its food base, its members must spend most of their time working, and many children help with the work (unless there are slaves). Consequently, instead of keeping babies nearby as mothers gathered foodstuff in hunter-gatherer societies, babies and young children were left behind, swaddled, and fed things other than breastmilk, increasing the mother's fertility after birth. Instead of attuned adults caring for babies 24/7, older siblings became primary caregivers. And because grains, though less nutritious, put more pounds on offspring, reproduction was promoted and continued, with decreased spacing of children, though with high rates of disease and malformation.

At the same time, some people accumulated more than others and, with the addition of fear for tomorrow, hoarded the excess, leading to inequality, hierarchy, and the need for further coercion of the populace to 'keep order.' Elites became upset with the results of denying babies their needs: selfish, aggressive, ungovernable individuals. Systems had to be created to control the dysregulated. The kinder way to discuss this is to say that cultural and religious systems of post-traumatic healing were created to alleviate the suffering caused in childhood. So, after the first step of denying babies and children what they need (carrying and holding, breastfeeding, companionship, play), the second step was to punish them for wanting it. This created a neurobiology that was easier to control from the outside because of conditioned self-doubt (and distrust of self and everything in life).

The consequence is a shift in human nature. Cooperative, communal interests and capacities are replaced with dysregulation, social opposition, aggression, and self-centeredness. These are accompanied by a wide range of psychopathologies that still plague modern civilized nations. Coercion of some kind is required to keep order, whether through familial, civic, or religious institutions and hierarchies. Whereas among SBHG, human capacities for communal living are fostered from the ground up, as part of the personality, in 'civilized societies' that undercare for children,

cooperation must often be imposed from the outside, coerced with external rules enforced with threat of punishment.

## **BACK TO MODERN DOMINANT CULTURE**

Though it is hard to face on first awareness, humans in dominant cultures tend to be pretty unintelligent (though they might get high scores on achievement tests, can think hypothetically, and build complicated technologies). Compared to humans from societies that existed sustainably for thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of years, they are not so smart. They are blindly chewing up the island they are on as if it is not alive and vital for their lives.

In sustainable societies everyone learns to cooperate with earth's systems to survive and thrive. They must learn the signals of local plants and animals, not only to avoid predation but to gather food and discern next moves in a changeable landscape. In contrast, in dominant 'civilized' culture this is no longer the case. People can live in concrete towers and never think of earth systems beyond the weather, even though the modern lifestyle is systematically destroying virtually all planetary ecosystems, deliberately wiping out species and biodiversity, due to technological prowess (e.g., sea floor trawling that leaves behind a wasteland). Many technological advances do not take into account the long-term welfare of the earth. Members of dominant cultures become 'free riders' on earth systems—cheaters, that is, until the systems collapse from abuse or misuse. Violation of women's dignity and their rights to control reproduction contribute to the overpopulation that features prominently in these trends. The dominant human culture has rapidly devastated planetary ecosystems in a matter of centuries, a blink of an eye in terms of planetary history. The technologies the dominant culture develops are often the drivers of devastation—for example, as rare minerals are sought for smart phones or lithium batteries, more land is denuded of biodiversity (Mander, 1991; Mumford, 1934/2010). Leaders continue to promote a

form of so-called self-interest (not really, since it is killing off what supports humanity, so it is more like *self-disinterest*) that leads to the annihilation of self and other. Worse, even among those concerned for ‘sustainable’ practices, the focus is usually only on *human* welfare—other natural entities are considered mere objects (‘resources’) for human objectives.

Whereas the evolved nest provides the grounding for our inherited human nature of cooperative, communal living, there is a second part: humans are earth creatures. Normal human attachment includes attachment to *place* (or *places* as in migratory patterns<sup>1</sup>). To be fully human means to be embedded in place. It’s a melting into place, the being-with place—its entities, its nuances, its uniqueness. It takes a fearlessness and a slip into another realm of being—the mystery of Being. The deeper Self, Commonself, big self beyond the ego-self. The sorting, categorizing mind cannot know this Self because it takes surrender of the ego, of control of objectifying and distancing. A placeless human is some other creature, a hungry ghost, as in Miyasake’s films (see Bai, 2012). These are disembodied humans afraid of being and of not-being (Laing, 1990), who take their place in the universe as wanton wanderers (Frankfurt, 1971).

Worse, the problem is systemic. Modern societies have isolated their knowing to only a human-centered knowledge base, and grown away from a full ecological knowledge and thereby away from full humanity. For example, the illusion of Westerners from the northern hemisphere is that humans are getting more open and less violent (Pinker, 2011), as there has been a decrease in physical violence over the centuries since the European Enlightenment. But such scholars are not looking very far back or very deeply, and hence are using the wrong baseline, Western culture, an aberration in the history of the world because of its focus on individualism, self-interest, and

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, the Bushmen of southern Africa have lived sustainably for over 40,000 years according to archeological evidence (Balter, 2012), migrating regularly over thousands of miles, but recognizing the entities of the landscape. Van der Post (1961) recalls being laughed at because he did not recognize a tree along the route.

domination of nature (Narvaez, 2016a).<sup>2</sup> Westerners who present a Whig history (“Aren’t we the greatest!”) are looking in the wrong places. For example, they are not attending to how multinational corporations have been imposing their ways (“market consensus” from Reagan era; see Nadeau, 2013) as the latest imperialism, similar to empires of the past but perhaps worse because they use their vast technological power to wipe out biological and cultural diversity and poison land, sea, water, and air, backed up by false economic models that the elites in charge believe in or succumb to and force on everyone else (Korten, 2015; Perkins, 2016; Eisler, 2007). Multinational corporations feel no connection to the landscape, rationalizing and practicing detachment from relationships and responsibility to the Whole (detached imagination). Easterly (2007) describes the long history of damage done from good intentions among Westerners who move into “third world” areas. Like the Europeans moving into the Americas, they assume that their habits are the best ways, treating everyone and everything like an “it” instead of a “Thou;” they viciously (even in sweet voices) impose their ways on the local peoples and landscape, to the detriment of local biocultural ecologies.<sup>3</sup>

Importantly for this time in our history, the stress from early undercare undermines the development of human-in-nature expertise, the “enskilment” of living on and with the earth (Ingold, 2011. P. 37). For example, one loses sense of oneness with the Whole, part of what normally develops in early life with evolved care (Schoore, 2001). One loses a sense of solidarity with humans and with other-than-humans, resulting in impaired perception and diminished attunement (Narvaez 2014). This makes it easy to shift to a human supremacist orientation (Jensen, 2016). These findings are not surprising if one attends to the parenting practices humans evolved for their very helpless neonates.

---

<sup>2</sup> Again, each civilization has had its blind spots and cruelties. For example, the cruelty of imperial China was legendary, not only in the state but in households, with such things as foot-binding of young girls by their mothers: breaking toes and binding feet so they would not grow but resemble lotus flowers, which was sexually attractive to the older men who would become their husbands and which of course would hamper walking, let alone running. Mary Daly (1990) reviewed several torturous practices towards women in civilizations other than the West (e.g., widow burning, female genital mutilation).

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that there are not injustices, such as violations of women’s and children’s rights in particular, that the international community can help reverse. See Eisler (2015).

Babies actually expect to be treated as equals, as members of the community. They expect their needs to be met. Though they can be punished into a belief in hierarchy and succumb to greater power, their basic orientation is to be a member of a democratic group where their voices count equally. The nuances of justice and care have yet to develop throughout childhood, but the very basics of democratic life are apparent in young children—when they receive evolved-nest care.

## **EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS**

What do we do when a child has not received species-typical loving care in early life? When children are undercared for in early life, they carry it with them ever after, unless intervention occurs. Many children arrive at school without the grounding needed to thrive. Educators are faced with many children whose self-regulatory systems are completely disordered, making it even harder than normal to sit still and focus on school tasks. Ideally, childhood education is set up to enliven the child, much like caregiver relations provide support for optimal arousal of interest and connection. In these settings, children follow their own inclinations and interests without being punished or suppressed. Even in more typical schools, teachers can shape their practice in ways that heal and grow their charges. They can build a classroom that sustains the wellbeing of their charges as they learn. Here are suggestions for educational interventions based on what works in Western contexts (from Narvaez, 2006, 2007, 2010).

First, sustaining teachers understand that their relationship with the student is primary. A secure (consistent, warmly responsive) relationship provides a bridge of connection, of influence, and of healing. Sometimes students are so stressed that they are unable to be comfortable in a relationship. In this case, teachers can assess the needs of the child in terms of general social and emotional development. Does the child have difficulty regulating anxiety or aggression? Then the teacher can set up

regular practices for developing self-regulation (e.g., relaxation and visualization, counting to ten). In this manner, self-protective orientations can be calmed down so that a more collaborative orientation can develop.

Second, the sustaining teacher sets up a classroom climate of support—both for ethical behavior and for achievement. The teacher understands that children who struggle need *more* support. Some students may need help with getting along with others, and the teacher can set up ways for students to develop social skills and generate pleasure being with others. Group play, group song, and group dance are all means to grow a sense of pleasure in socializing and being together. In this way, relational attunement with others is fostered, along with greater opportunities for ethics of engagement and communion with others.

Third, after building capacities for calmness and connectedness, the sustaining teacher broadens the students' imaginations by emphasizing connections to the broader, culturally diverse human community, as well as to the biodiverse ecological communities of the planet. They all comprise 'us.' We are responsible to act virtuously for the wellbeing of all. A communal imagination can form the backdrop of everything the classroom does.

The RAVES model (Narvaez & Bock, 2015; based on the Community Voices and Character Education project, Narvaez, 2009; Narvaez & Bock, 2009; Narvaez et al., 2004; Narvaez & Endicott, 2009; Narvaez & Lies, 2009) provides five guiding principles for teachers to foster ethical development in the classroom.

**R is for relationships**, which as noted above, ground everything in the classroom. The classroom becomes a place of security for each child, a place of community where each child is able to contribute to the welfare of all and reaches purposeful achievement.

**A is for apprenticeship.** Human beings learn fully under an apprenticeship model that trains perception, skilled action, and motivations for excellence. Mentors provide guided instruction while students are immersed and acting in the particular domain of learning. Novices are guided through the steps of expertise development: getting a sense of the big picture, attending to facts and skills, practicing procedures, and integrating skills across contexts.

**V is for virtuous role models.** The teacher conveys expectations for virtuous behavior and immerses the children in visions and stories of virtuous exemplars in history and in the present day. Well-regarded community members are mentors to students as they learn the ins and outs of virtuous practice.

**E is for ethical expertise.** Specific skills are identified according to student need. Ethical skill development is integrated into regular instruction. Skills cover ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical focus, and ethical action.

**S is for self-authorship.** Ultimately, every teacher's goal is to be no longer needed. Ideally, every student has learned what the teacher has to share. Part of this knowledge is how to cultivate one's own virtue—through reflective selection of activities and relationships. Within the classroom, students develop a moral identity, a commitment to goodness, which they then seek to maintain through self-monitoring.

Sometimes individuals reach adolescence or adulthood still impaired. What can these individuals do?

## **SELF RE-INVENTION IN ADULthood**

What about adults who did not receive evolved-nest care, nor interventions in childhood? I describe Development Ethical Ecological Practice (DEEP; Narvaez, 2014) as a form of self- or therapeutic healing. We always have the option to reinvent

ourselves, though it becomes more difficult with age. What we learn from neuroscience and the operations of dynamic systems is that we can revamp our brains through intentional intervention (i.e., self or guided therapy). Relationship experiences are again the foundation for change.

DEEP involves a tripartite set of practices. The first set is to learn to self-calm, to move away from stress reactivity for processing information or social relations. This is necessary to avoid protectionist ethics as a disposition. One must learn to self-calm so that one can then lose oneself in the moment of being with others and grow the brain's right hemisphere capacities (Siegel, 1999). Methods for self-calming include meditation, deep breathing, and loving kindness practices.

The second set of practices involves growing social joy. This is necessary for the engagement ethic. One must learn to be relationally attuned with others. Daniel Stern (2010) noted that attending to the dynamic forms of vitality in relationship is an accessible place for therapy. During babyhood we built implicit relational knowing about being-with others. From the patterns across our specific relationships, we generalized our implicit social knowledge structures (schemas for being). Face-to-face play between baby and parent becomes a clinical window on how the parent-child partnership is going: "It reveals when parenting is easy or hard, natural or forced, intrusive, controlling, disorganized, passive, aggressive, rejecting, etc." (Stern, 2010, pp. 106-7). Therapists who attend to these relational signals can use them to guide their treatment of the dyad. One can use a similar approach to couple or individual therapy. For self-healing, various forms of whole-body play can assist in this healing: rough-and-tumble play with partners or children, folk dancing, etc.

The third set of practices involves expanding one's imagination to be inclusive and communal. We have the power to change ourselves. We each have shifting moral selves that reflect our history. The selves we have favored come about from practice, mostly in early life but also during other sensitive periods. For example, we can be triggered into a protectionist mindset when our conditioning leads us to feel



threatened. But we can work to recognize our protectionist tendencies and learn to move our mindset back to openness, back to communal connection.

## **FIRST STEPS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE FUTURE**

Over the past millennia, in parallel with the destruction of ecosystems around the earth, human civilizations have trumped biological imperatives. The scourge of selfish, violent, and destructive humans emanates from the fact that many children miss the supportive care they evolved to need, the evolved nest. With the evolved nest the brain and body develop normally and optimally. Degraded evolved nests, an increasing problem today, are incapable of promoting a proper humanity.

The human race hurtles towards its demise because of a death-oriented culture that dominates nearly every inch of the planet. How do we move away from all the behaviors that form a grand attractor of self-destruction? The first step in changing humanity's future is to change our self-understandings.

- Instead of taking today's misbehaving human beings as natural and normal, we need to understand how abnormal those behaviors are for a cooperating creature. They are an indicator that something has gone terribly wrong.
- We need to understand that the nature of humanity is to be cooperative. We can see this nature in nomadic foragers who provide the evolved nest to their young and continue social closeness throughout life.
- Humans learn from immersed experience. They are biosocial beings—their biology is shaped by their social experience.
- We are social mammals with built-in needs. We are born highly immature and require the evolved nest to develop properly.
- Baselines have shifted for early care, messing up the trajectories of future adults, and then societies, and then humanity generally.
- Early life experience shapes biosocial capacities; it matters for the kind of human nature one develops. Experience forms the building blocks of worldview and

personal and cultural narratives that guide life choices and actions. If the community has not been cooperative with your needs as a child, you will not learn cooperation.

- For humans to thrive, the earth must thrive.
- There are societies who have lived sustainably for tens of thousands of years (e.g., San Bushmen; Australian Aborigines). We need to turn to them for guidance in how to shift to sustainable, wise ways.
- We are the animal with the capability to change. This makes us most dangerous but also most promising for turning things around.

We can shift our narratives about what guides our societies to a biodemocratic narrative. David Korten (2015) contends that a cultural narrative shapes a society's actions. Right now, the dominating culture maintains the wrong story, one that holds money and markets sacred, at the expense of biocultural diversity. He suggests we can change the story, to that of a *sacred, living planet*, one that honors diversity and bioregionalism. I suggest that it start with our treatment of children as sacred and deserving of respect. Humans learn to appreciate a *living* earth by following their true evolutionary inheritances, starting with the treatment of babies, and leading to other-regarding personalities and inclusive concern for humans and other-than-humans. This is our democratic promise, to which we can return.

## References

- Bai, H. (2012). Reclaiming our moral agency through healing: A call to moral, social, environmental activists. *Journal of Moral Education*, 41(3), 311-328.
- Balter, M. (2012). Ice age tools hint at 40,000 years of Bushman culture. *Science*, 337(6094), 512.
- Berry, T. (1988). *The dream of the earth*. San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.
- Boehm, C. (1999). *Hierarchy in the forest: The evolution of egalitarian behavior*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourgeault, C. (2003). *The wisdom way of knowing: Reclaiming an ancient tradition to awaken the heart*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cushman, P. (1995). *Constructing the self, constructing America*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Daly, M. (1990). *Gyn/Ecology: The metaethics of radical feminism*. New York: Beacon Press.

- DeMeo, J. (2011). *Saharasia: The 4000 BCE origins of child abuse, sex-repression, warfare and social violence, in the deserts of the old world*. Brownvale, Alberta: New Energy Works.
- Dunn, R. (2011). *The wild life of our bodies: Predators, parasites, and partners that shape who we are today*. New York: Harper.
- Easterly, W. (2007). *The white man's burden: Why the West's efforts to aid the rest have done so much ill and so little good*. London: Penguin.
- Eisler, R. (2013). Protecting the majority of humanity: Toward an integrated approach to crimes against present and future generations. In Cordonier Segger, M. & Jodoin, S. (eds.) *Sustainable development, international criminal justice, and treaty implementation*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2013 (pp.305-326).
- Eisler, R. (2007). *The real wealth of nations: Creating a caring economics*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Eisler, R. (1988). *The chalice and the blade*. New York, NY: Harper One.
- Frankfurt, H. (1971). Freedom of the will and the concept of a person. *Journal of Philosophy*, 68(1), 5-20.
- Freud, S. (1929/2002). *Civilization and its discontents*. London: Penguin.
- Fry, D. (Ed.) (2013) *War, peace and human nature*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Gimbutas, M. (1991). *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Gluckman, P. D. & Hanson, M. A. (2005). *Fetal Matrix: Evolution, development and disease*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gluckman, P. D., & Hanson, M. A. (2007). Developmental plasticity and human disease: Research directions. *Journal of Internal Medicine*, 261, 461-471.
- Gluckman, P.D., & Hanson, M.A. (2004). Living with the past: Evolution, development, and patterns of disease. *Science*, 305(5691), 1733-1736.
- Gowdy, J. (1998). *Limited wants, unlimited means: A reader on hunter-gatherer economics and the environment*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.
- Gowdy, J. (2005). Gatherer-hunters and the mythology of the market. In R. B. Lee & R. Daly (Eds.), *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers* (pp. 391-398). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gershoff, E. T. (2013) Spanking and child development: We know enough now to stop hitting our children. *Child Development Perspectives*, 7 (3), 133-137.
- Gershoff, E.T., Lansford, J.E., Sexton, H.R., Davis-Kean, P.E., & Sameroff, A.J. (2012). Longitudinal links between spanking and children's externalizing behaviors in a national sample of White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian American families. *Child Development*, 83, 838-843.
- Gimbutas, M. (1982). *The goddesses and gods of old Europe*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Hewlett, B.S., & Lamb, M.E. (2005). *Hunter-gatherer childhoods: Evolutionary, developmental and cultural perspectives*. New Brunswick, NJ: Aldine.
- Ingold, T. (2005). On the social relations of the hunter-gatherer band. In R.B. Lee, R.B. & R. Daly (Eds.), *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers* (pp. 399-410). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ingold, T. (2011). *The perception of the environment: Essay on livelihood, dwelling and skill*. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, T. (2013). Prospect. In T. Ingold & G. Palsson (Eds.), *Biosocial Becomings: Integrating Social and Biological Anthropology* (pp. 1-21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jensen, D. (2016). *The myth of human supremacy*. New York: Seven Stories Press.
- Konner, M. (2005). Hunter-gatherer infancy and childhood: The !Kung and others. In B. Hewlett & M. Lamb (Eds.), *Hunter-gatherer childhoods: Evolutionary, developmental and cultural perspectives* (pp. 19-64). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Korten, D. (2015) *Change the story, change the future*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.
- Laing, R.D. (1959/1990). *The divided self*. London: Penguin.
- Lee, R.B., & Daly, R. (Eds.) (2005). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of hunters and gatherers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mander, J. (1978). *Four arguments for the elimination of television*. New York: William Morrow Publishing.
- Mander, J. (1991). In absence of the sacred: The future of technology and the survival of the Indian nations. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Martin, C.L. (1999). *The way of the human being*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Miller, A. (1983/1990). *For your own good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*. New York, NY: Noonday Press.
- Mumford, L. (1934/2010). *Technics & Civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nadeau, R.L. (2013). *Rebirth of the sacred: Science, religion, and the new environmental ethos*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Narvaez, D. (2013). The 99%: Development and socialization within an evolutionary context: Growing up to become “A good and useful human being.” In D. Fry (Ed.), *War, Peace and Human Nature: The convergence of Evolutionary and Cultural Views* (pp. 643-672). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Narvaez, D. (2015a). Editorial: Torture, evil and moral development. *Journal of Moral Education*, 44(1), 1-16.
- Narvaez, D. (2015b). The co-construction of virtue: Epigenetics, neurobiology and development. In N. E. Snow (Ed.), *Cultivating Virtue* (pp. 251-277). New York, NY: Oxford University Press
- Narvaez, D. (2015c). The neurobiology of moral sensitivity: Evolution, epigenetics and early experience. In D. Mowrer & P. Vandenberg (Eds.), *The art of morality: Developing moral*

- sensitivity across the curriculum (pp. 19-42). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Narvaez, D. (2015d). Understanding flourishing: Evolutionary baselines and morality. *Journal of Moral Education*, 44(3), 253-262.
- Narvaez, D. (2016a). Baselines for virtue. In J. Annas, D. Narvaez, & N. Snow (Eds.), *Developing the virtues: Integrating perspectives*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Narvaez, D. (2016b). *Embodied morality: Protectionism, engagement and imagination*. New York, NY: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Narvaez, D., Braungart-Rieker, J., Miller, L., Gettler, L., & Hastings, P. (forthcoming, 2016). (Eds.), *Contexts for young child flourishing: Evolution, family and society*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Narvaez, D., Gleason, T., Wang, L., Brooks, J., Lefever, J., Cheng, A., & Centers for the Prevention of Child Neglect (2013). The Evolved Development Niche: Longitudinal Effects of Caregiving Practices on Early Childhood Psychosocial Development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28 (4), 759-773. Doi: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.07.003
- Narvaez, D., Gleason, T., Wang, L., Brooks, J., Lefever, J., Cheng, A., & Centers for the Prevention of Child Neglect (2013). The Evolved Development Niche: Longitudinal Effects of Caregiving Practices on Early Childhood Psychosocial Development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 28 (4), 759-773. Doi: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.07.003
- Narvaez, D., Panksepp, J., Schore, A., & Gleason, T. (Eds.) (2013a). *Evolution, Early Experience and Human Development: From Research to Practice and Policy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Narvaez, D., Valentino, K., Fuentes, A., McKenna, J., & Gray, P. (Eds.) (2014). *Ancestral landscapes in human evolution: Culture, childrearing and social wellbeing*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Narvaez, D., Wang, L., Cheng, A., Gleason, T., Woodbury, R., Kurth, A., & Lefever, J.B. (2016). *The importance of touch for early moral development*. Manuscript under review.
- Narvaez, D., Wang, L., Gleason, T., Cheng, A., Lefever, J., & Deng, L. (2013). The Evolved Developmental Niche and sociomoral outcomes in Chinese three-year-olds. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 10(2), 106-127.
- Perkins, J. (2016). *The New confessions of an economic hitman (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Pinker, S. (2011) *The better angels of our nature*. New York, NY: Viking.
- Russo, J., Moral, R., Balogh, G.A., Mailo, D., Russo, I.H. (2005). The protective role of pregnancy in breast cancer. *Breast Cancer Research*, 7(3), 131-142.
- Sahlins, M. (2008). *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Schore, A.N. (2001). The effects of early relational trauma on right brain development, affect regulation, and infant mental health. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 22, 201-269.

- Schore, A. N. (2003a). *Affect dysregulation & disorders of the self*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Schore, A. N. (2003b) *Affect regulation and the repair of the self*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Trevarthen, C. (2005). Stepping away from the mirror: Pride and shame in adventures of companionship—Reflections on the nature and emotional needs of infant intersubjectivity. In C.S. Carter, L. Ahnert, K.E. Grossmann, S.B., Hrdy, M.E. Lamb, S.W. Porges, & N. Sachser (Eds.), *Attachment and bonding: A new synthesis* (pp. 55-84). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Trevathan, W.R. (2011). *Human birth: An evolutionary perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Van der Post, L. (1961). *The heart of the hunter: Customs and myths of the African Bushman*. Harvest/Harcourt Brace & Co, San Diego, CA.
- Vaughn, G. (2015). *The gift in the heart of language: The maternal source of meaning*. Mimesis International.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1957). *The child and the family*. London: Tavistock.
- Wolff, R. (2001). *Original wisdom*. Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions.
- Worster, D. (1994). *Nature's economy: A history of ecological ideas* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

---

Darcia Narvaez, PhD, is professor of psychology at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, USA. She publishes extensively on moral development and education. Author or editor of 13 books, her most recent authored books include *Embodied Morality: Protectionism, Engagement and Imagination*, and *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture and Wisdom*, which won the William James Book Award from the American Psychological Association. She is a fellow of the American Psychological Association and the American Educational Research Association. She writes a popular blog for *Psychology Today* ("Moral Landscapes").

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Darcia Narvaez, PhD, at [dnarvaez@nd.edu](mailto:dnarvaez@nd.edu)